

2020

## Distraction; or, The Public Value of Literary Study

Joseph R. Urgo  
*Bryant College*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://egrove.olemiss.edu/jx>



Part of the [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Urgo, Joseph R. (2020) "Distraction; or, The Public Value of Literary Study," *Journal X*: Vol. 2 : No. 2 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://egrove.olemiss.edu/jx/vol2/iss2/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at eGrove. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal X* by an authorized editor of eGrove. For more information, please contact [egrove@olemiss.edu](mailto:egrove@olemiss.edu).

## Distraction; or, The Public Value of Literary Study

Joseph R. Urgo

*Joseph R. Urgo is Chair of the Department of English and Humanities at Bryant College in Smithfield, RI. He is the author of Faulkner's Apocrypha: A Fable, Snopes, and The Spirit of Human Rebellion, Novel Frames: Race, Sex, and History in American Culture, and Willa Cather and the Myth of American Migration, as well as essays on American literature and culture.*

*Pleasures lie on the other side of attentiveness. The physical act of reading, the focus, the posture, and the suspension may at times approach levels of pain, although this discomfort, usually no more than the awkwardness of elbows in the dark, is fleeting. What a text solicits is not attention, but distraction. The text provides leave, it asks that you walk alone, and accuse the world that possesses you, including your own cognitive resources, of insufficiency. After all, with the page in hand, you are looking for something, listening for it. If the reading fails, if distraction is not rewarded with even the slightest increase in the capacity to endure the world that commands attention, you will retaliate, and someone will suffer for it.*

In 1936, Willa Cather wrote a letter to *The Commonwealth* defending the function of writing and reading literary texts. The letter is included in the volume, *Willa Cather on Writing*, with a 1930s left-baiting title, "Escapism." Cather's central argument is that to accuse art and literature of being escapist is to engage in tautological thinking. "What has art ever been but escape?", Cather asks, and what possible purpose can literature otherwise serve?

Nearly all the Escapists in the long past have managed their own budget and their social relations so unsuccessfully that I wouldn't want them for my landlords, or my bankers, or my neighbors. They were valuable, like powerful stimulants, only when they were left out of the social

and industrial routine which goes on every day all over the world. Industrial life has to work out its own problems. (21)

Literary criticism in the twentieth century has been engaged in a quest for relevance that invites failure and brings displeasure and aggravation to its practitioners. Deans and accreditation boards want to know about outcomes. Career planners want to know about options for undergraduate majors. Meanwhile, the ambitious graduate student is at work to prove that the past ten years of criticism on *My Antonia* is false or windy and the true interpretation is at hand — his hand. Or the even more ambitious assistant professor is set to establish how the intricate puzzle of gender relations in her culture is exposed in the text, which she explicates. The quest for relevance in literary studies has resulted in a succession of theoretical approaches, arguing everything from all the world's a text (and thus the province of formalist literary scholarship) to all the world's social ills exist in some particular text, or canon, or tradition. Meanwhile, the function of literary criticism within the structured performances of public thinking has eroded steadily, and the only voices that are certain to reach the public at large are those that attack the institution and the practice of literary scholarship.

Willa Cather's letter to *The Commonwealth* addresses the question that every generation of literary scholars must answer: Why study literature? The implicit answer in recent decades has been anything but Cather's invitation to escape. Cather opens her letter with an account of primitive Southwest Native American women, living "under the perpetual threat of drought and famine," who nonetheless invest hours of effort to paint geometrical patterns on their earthenware jars and pots even "when they had nothing to cook in them." The urge to make the world aesthetically pleasing, according to Cather, springs from "an unaccountable predilection" of human behavior (19). Nonetheless, the question of the usefulness of such activities dogs us, especially in United States civilization, where our attention is turned so persistently to productivity. Here is where Cather takes a less than genteel turn. All true poets are "useful," she argues, "because they refresh and recharge the spirit of those who can read their language" (20). Cather retreats quickly from the second point, referring instead to the "powerful stimulants" in literature and defending literature against calls for immediate social relevance. The point she does not pursue is her assertion that whatever escape literary artists provide, they do so only for *those who can read their language*.

The women who painted intricate patterns on pots and jars saw past the practical utility of these items to something more — not necessarily more profound, but certainly less immediate. At the very least, the etched shapes reflect a power of cognition that refuses to limit itself to water-carrying, that by its artistic endeavor asserts that the limits of its attention are not met merely by toting water up the hill and toting human waste back down. The basis for reading the language of arts is to recognize how their attention has been focused, and then to read past representation to the cognitive quality of the impulse that produced it. The inability to read their language produces charges of irrelevance and uselessness because such readings read the text but cannot read past

it. Likewise, the insistence upon reading the language of art as if it were limited to its representational or performative functions leads to successive, disposable interpretive gestures, resulting in higher-level charges of irrelevance and uselessness. It is as if to say, how nice that those Pueblo Indians decorated their pots, they must have had plenty of leisure time to make such pretty shapes.

In *Moby Dick*, Melville invites the process of *reading past* on a number of occasions, extracting from everyday whaling operations richly evocative content. The narrative itself reads past the business of whaling to a succession of complexities embodied in the purposeful actions of sailors. In the following passage, Melville describes the whale line, tied to the harpoon:

Again: as the profound calm which only apparently precedes and prophecies of the storm, is perhaps more awful than the storm itself; for, indeed, the calm is but the wrapper and envelope of the storm; and contains it in itself, as the seemingly harmless rifle holds the fatal powder, and the ball, and the explosion; so the graceful repose of the line, as it silently serpentine about the oarsmen before being brought into actual play — this is a thing which carries more of true error than any other aspect of this dangerous affair. But why say more? All men live enveloped in whale lines. All are born with halters round their necks; but it is only when caught in the swift, sudden turn of death, that mortals realize the silent, subtle, ever-present perils of life. And if you be a philosopher, though seated in the whale-boat, you would not at heart feel one whit of terror, than though seated before your evening fire with a poker, and not a harpoon, by your side. (306)

The useful whale line is explained metaphorically, as it shares the qualities of the quiet that precedes a storm, or of the unheld, loaded weapon — harmless and calm until its potential function commences. These images are enough to know the whale line, and to appreciate its utility and its purpose in the narrative. But to read past the whale line is to recognize the thought processes contained within those metaphors. If all men live enveloped in whale lines, living day to day might be understood as the storm's calm prologue, or the uncocked weapon, so that we might offer the interpretation that grace, dignity, and even the larger structures of civilization simply give form to human illusions of permanence. Here, with Melville's language, we begin to read past his image, but not quite. We are still at the level of the image of the whale line and its applicability to human nature, still thus at the symbolic function.

The last line of the passage invites the process of reading past its interpretive possibilities. One does not need to sit in a whaleboat and hold a harpoon to attend to the terror of the image created by the whale line. If you are philosophical, if you *can read their language*, then "seated before your evening fire with a poker, and not a harpoon, by your side," you will gain access to the cognitive horrors tapped by the coiled whale line. The gesture of poking the fire thus emerges as an attenuation of the harpoon thrust (as well as a hundred other such outward gestures), and the safety of the domestic hearth a delusion

equal to Ahab's ambition of control over natural forces. Linked this way to the *Pequod's* mission, fire poking becomes a task worthy of pleased distraction, like toting water in decorated pots. The material circumstances of an action obscure but do not change the precarious nature of the chain of circumstances to which it ultimately contributes. To read past the whale line is to read past whaling as a whole toward the cognitive processes that led Melville's imagination to be filled so deeply with harpoons, vessels, and madmen.

In *Moby Dick*, Melville consistently documents and reads past the utilities of whaling, and the whale line passage is exemplary, not exceptional. Nonetheless, to read past Melville is to contemplate the turn of his attention to whaling in order to capture images sufficient to the imaginative direction of the text. To read past the juxtaposition of harpoon and fireplace poker, for example, might lead one to recognize subsequent correspondences between images in the text and gestures contained within the reader's own daily performances. Thus, the existence of Ahab's quest for the great white whale exists over the facts of whaling like those geometrical patterns on earthenware pots. The women need those pots, but they don't need the geometrical designs except as an escape from the needed pots. Ahab and the crew of the *Pequod* need whales, but they don't need *Moby Dick* except as an expression of their need to transcend or escape the business of whaling. The limits of this crew's attention are not met, in other words, merely by killing whales. If one's sense of the now is expansive, it contains room in it for the day-to-day functions of whaling and pot-toting, and also for great white whales and geometrical figurations. Throughout the text, Melville probes the unaccountable predilection of human beings to project the forms and structures of their thoughts on wider canvases than circumstances provide, to become creatively, and at times destructively, inattentive to the practical content of their thoughts and the tasks at hand. The continuous movement by Pueblo Indian women, up and down the cliffs, from their rock-perched homes to sources of water far below, most surely influenced the geometrical patterns of their aesthetic impulses, reified on their pot burdens. The continuous movement by New England whalers, further and further out to sea, to destroy life for commerce and for illumination, worked on Melville's mind so that every operation, from signing on to the ship to harpooning the whale, became invested with a significance to those who could read its language. Pleasure arises from the discovery that through inattention labor may come to possess value, even significance, far beyond our capacity to comprehend fully each gesture, each toting. In every case, the literary emerges from these forms and structures of distraction, and it is in this mode of cognition that literary critics find their vocation.

Distraction is serious business in literature. At its very best, the literary is the art of *reading past*. It is not the study of history, or the study of social conditions, or the study of any particular representation of reality but the study of how one reads *past* every one of these phenomena. Reading past means overpassing the mimetic detail — a whaling venture, a pattern of conflict, a social issue — to a consideration of the particular representation as imaginative stimulus within the larger system of meaning created by the work. And even then, it is not the system of meaning that one settles on but the creation of meaning,

the action, or movement of the system towards expansive meaning. One reads literature to be present at the creation, and then to move past what has been created toward the something more that informs, in essence, the literary. Those who cannot read the language of literary texts, or whose minds are satisfied with lesser works, or who prefer the seemingly less mediated language of history or social science, may not be comfortable or find use in reading past but read, rather, for the mimetic or informational quality of the text. This is understandable, as we seem to lack an articulate rationale for the study of literary writing, and much of what passes as literary criticism is really history, sociology, or cultural commentary.

Reading precedes comprehension, interpretation, and criticism. The question of how one reads is not a simple one, and its complexity has become increasingly apparent as reading habits shift at the end of this century and as literary criticism loses its public relevance. Charles Altieri thus proposes “that we shift our attention from the relations between interpretive statements and their objects to the positions that works of art make available for reflecting on ourselves as interpreting subjects” (291-2). Altieri proposes a move away from concern with the constellation of interpretive paradigms surrounding literary texts and toward greater attention to textually-based extensions of the reader’s own imaginative capacities — and then to construct a language and a means of explaining this process. “The problem for contemporary theory is to show how . . . imaginative activity can at once be assessed within a common language and have some influence on the principles adapted for those assessments” (16). Similarly, Michael Bérubé finds that “while we academic readers have been devising more and more exacting ways of reading our texts, our worlds and our critics, the reading skills and reasoning facilities of [even the college-educated mass public] have become cause for national alarm” (65). It may be that the ways in which academic readers read are ill communicated by the rituals of critical presentation and poorly represented within the discourse of college and university curricula. It is not likely, for example, that the demands of reading imaginative literature and the skills required to read an executive summary are properly or usefully conflated in assessing facility with language. John Guillory correctly dismisses the internecine battles within the literary establishment over canons and cores as a symptom of a much larger problem, a crisis shared by conservative and radical academics alike. Two distinct forms of “cultural capital” are pitted against each other in the processes of contemporary intellectual formation, “one of which is ‘traditional,’ the other organic to the constitution of the professional-managerial class” (45). The literary establishment has not performed well in defending the place of traditional literary study (in *any* form, from Great Books to postcolonialism) within the context of the intellectual demands of corporate capitalism. “It has proven to be much easier to quarrel about the content of the curriculum than to confront the implications of a fully emergent professional-managerial class which no longer requires the cultural capital of the old bourgeoisie.” Nonetheless, Guillory’s sense of “cultural capital” stresses the content over the active demands of imaginative literature. When academic readers become entrenched over issues of *what* to read, they sidestep and become mournfully inattentive to issues of *how* to read.

“Through the fence, between the curling flower spaces, I could see them hitting.” The sentence is the opening line of Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*. It makes little sense, literally, to talk about curling flower spaces or what lies between them. Explication can fix this problem, and maybe a drawing of a pair of curled flower stems, showing how the space bordered by the stems also curls (like one of those pictures of a lamp that turns out to be two profiles facing one another) will settle the issue once and for all. But after all that, we still have this confused sentence and the question: Why was it written this way? To demonstrate how perception can be deceiving, psychologists use the trick picture with the lamp and the twin profiles. Is Faulkner’s sentence meant to deceive? Unlike the profile/lamp, the sentence does not represent two images simultaneously. There is the fence, the curly spaces between the flowers, and the “I” who could see them hitting. More explication can help. The “I” is the voice of an idiot, the character Benjamin Compson, a retarded man whose perceptions are thus discordant with conventional narrative methods. Of course, we would have to forewarn anyone who might think that Faulkner’s book is an accurate depiction of the consciousness of a retarded man. Such representation would be impossible, since only the retarded man would be in a position to verify the text and no one as retarded as Benjamin Compson can read *The Sound and the Fury*. This, then, returns us to the sentence, which, divested of mimetic qualities and any test of credibility, remains senseless. We must read past the representational sense of the sentence toward something else.

With Faulkner, there is often the problem of making sense and the challenge to read past this problem. Not everyone has seen it this way. Edmund Volpe, in *A Reader’s Guide to William Faulkner*, provided a number of charts, graphs, and genealogies to make sense of Faulkner’s texts. Volpe’s project has continued over the years, with guides, notes, interpretations, approaches, and book-length readings produced regularly to aid the uninitiated in making their way through the text.<sup>1</sup> There are fifteen time shifts in Benjamin Compson’s narrative, and Volpe charts them. The implication is that once the reader masters the time shifts, the meaning of the text is clear. But this is not necessarily so. Knowing all the time shifts introduces an entirely new level of meaning to the text. To make schematic logic of Benjamin’s narrative is to establish a level of meaning that knows what the chapter, and the narrator, does not know: the schematic meaning of the text’s opening narrative. Clearly, even in an age when we do not talk about authorial intention, this text was meant to be confusing. If we eliminate the confusion by charting the time shifts, we are damaging the text no less than if we rewrote Dickens to make him more confusing: “Times the best it was of, worst the times it was of.” Why would anyone do that? The revision doesn’t help clarify what happens when the text is read as written. The same is true of the curling flower spaces, where making sense of the narrative destroys its effect and its meaning. Rather than making sense, the reader must read past.

Much of literary criticism proceeds in the same manner as Volpe’s famous (and admittedly seductive) guidebook. The critic’s method is often “this means this” and “this says this but really means this” and “this is meaningless unless you know that and once you know that then this means this” or, ultimately, “this

says this but really means this.” It is no wonder that the general readership for literary criticism — unlike that for history or the social sciences — has nearly disappeared. Who wants to be told what a book means? And worse, if you can’t know one book without reading another, why read either? “You don’t know about me,” announces the narrator on the first page of Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, “without you have read a book by the name of ‘The Adventures of Tom Sawyer,’ but that ain’t no matter.” It’s no matter because there is little about Huck Finn in the other book that is necessary to the experience of reading his emergence in the book he narrates. The self-defeating quality in much of literary criticism is that criticism is too often tied to explication — efforts to make the meaning plain are inevitably doomed to disposability because meaning changes with context, with readers’ sensibilities, and with shifting political, cultural, and social priorities. It is no wonder that the guidebooks keep coming, each decade making sense, again, of the tales told by idiots and artists. For literary studies to reassert its value in the present, it must get past, or read past, the meaning of texts.

*To read past* — say, to read past a common literary theme, such as social tolerance — is to experience a transformation of intellectual capacities so that the mimetic question, *what is this book about?* is supplanted by the reactive, or compensatory, question, *what is this book doing to me and my distracted sensibilities?* There is no other question wholly appropriate and wholly exclusive to the literary. Consider the hypothetical example of a novel about social tolerance. To read past tolerance is to expiate a prior understanding — not merely to recognize one’s own thinking but to have one’s thinking suspended, distracted — so that the mind is cognizant of the parallel, or the literary equivalence, to the intellectual energies that tolerance necessitates. It may well be that a novel that depicts an intolerant man would be wholly beside the point. Our attention, then, might be more productively focused on “expressions of certain modes of intelligence, thought, and feeling” in the novel, expressions unavailable elsewhere, in other discursive practices (Parker 38). David Parker thus directs the reader to attend to “the *spirit*, the *ethos* or character of a literary work’s creative thinking” and not to become snagged on its subject matter, its theme, or its mimetic qualities. What Parker is describing is a kind of *inattention*, where one willfully attends not to what is literally depicted but to the cognitive energies and structures that produced or gave rise to the representation. This kind of thinking is not always polite because it is often mistaken for irrelevance or taken as a form of hostility toward pressing business. “Reading is a judgment,” according to Sven Birkerts. “It brands as insufficient the understandings and priorities that govern ordinary life” (85). Unless one holds that literary texts are simply decorative, or that the geometrical shapes serve no cognitive purpose either in the drawing or the repeated, daily viewing, one must confront seriously the mode of attention demanded by literary distraction. To enter into the world of the curling flower spaces, one must become *inattentive* to the world where such utterance would interfere with business or be disruptive, and one must decide, for the time, that that ain’t no matter.

**inattention** *n.*

L17. [f. IN-3 + ATTENTION.]



Failure to pay attention or take notice; heedlessness, negligence. L17.  
Lack of courteous personal attention. L18.

The OED traces *inattention* to the late seventeenth century, when it signaled a “failure to pay attention or take notice” and the resultant judgment of “heedlessness, negligence.” One hundred years later, the inattentive were judged more severely and held more specifically responsible for their actions, as the term since then has indicated “lack of courteous personal attention.” Thus what starts as an observable human tendency (“failure to pay attention”) linked to irresponsibility (“negligence”), becomes, by the end of the eighteenth century, a form of misbehavior and a breach of etiquette as well (“lack of courteous personal attention”). In the twentieth century, inattention has evolved into a diagnosable intellectual malfunction, marking its complete metamorphosis from tendency to pathology. Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) is a psychological ailment commonly associated with childhood but also diagnosable in adults. Current research on the disorder, however, finds that far from indicating a *deficit*, the symptoms associated with ADD may signal an excess of attention. “The irony is that behavior interpreted as ‘thoughtless’ probably is a result of too much awareness and the desire to cope” (Cherkes-Julkowski et al. 6). The desire to conform to expectations and to cope with felt inadequacies produces behavioral irregularities, such as hyperactivity. Significantly, the person with ADD is more comfortable in an environment characterized by rapid shifts in stimuli and less comfortable in environments that call for sustained attention or the practice of repetitive tasks (9). The disorder may well be an advance indication of human adaptation to current trends in the social and intellectual environment. As the volume of sensory stimuli increases, the mind must spend more and more of its energies prioritizing its attentive capacities.

The issue, of course, involves what one ought to attend to. The processes of socialization and education involve directing one’s attention in socially acceptable, preferably productive ways. It is no coincidence that issues of attentiveness should fall within the provinces of medical science in the late twentieth century; the environment produced by technology makes the phenomenon particularly problematic, and thus “inattention” joins drinking, drug use, and smoking as medical illnesses, not rational social choices. Anyone who writes on a Windows-based word processing and personal computing system and feels the need to check e-mail periodically knows that communication technology works at cross-purposes to the art of sustained attention to single tasks. On the contrary, Windows technology specifically functions *against* focused attention and actively encourages a “multi-task” desktop ecology. The use of internet technology to foster reading skills also acts quite explicitly against sustained attention, as web sources are predicated on the fact that alternatives, or linked texts and images, are always one mouse-click away.<sup>2</sup> These are not incidental matters. Indeed, forms of attention have been recognized for decades by communication scholars to lie at the very core of civilization. “Attention structure is a way of understanding social organization in terms of the *structure of the system* of communication, rather than solely in terms of the nature of the signal, its content and behavioural effects” (Chance and Larsen 2). Hence, the divi-

sion of attention within social groups is fundamental to the power structure and future development of the social order. For example, the way in which one's attention is deployed may define one's relationship to the larger group — inattention may indicate anything from lack of concern to hostility, but it may also signal a position of leisured power. Similarly, the function exercised by some agencies to direct our attention, such as the power of news corporations and television broadcasts to set the agenda of public concern, far exceeds the content of any particular message conveyed. Chance and Larsen conclude that “[b]ecause of the central role of attention in the control and coordination of social behaviour, it is probable that the social organization of attention has been a crucial factor in human evolution.”

How does a literary text direct our attention? Birkirts identifies the asocial nature of reading, where reading is understood as an implicit rejection of the demands of the social world — whether it be the pressures on children to go play outside because it is a nice day, or on adults to interact with others or engage in some productive activity, such as going to the office or mowing the lawn. Reading is like walking alone, in Emerson's terms: “Whoso goes to walk alone, accuses the whole world; he declares all to be unfit to be his companions; it is very uncivil, nay, insulting; Society will retaliate” (100). Unlike a self-improvement book, a gardening manual, or a study of childhood development, the literary text is not read to prepare for more efficient, subsequent activity. Literary reading is more accurately understood as studied inattention, as it argues implicitly for a conception of the meaningful that may discount shared values of efficiency, including linear conceptions of time, the privileging of immediate, present concerns, and the injunction that one be accountable, always, in one's activities. When one reads literature attentively, one loses time, is unaware of present concerns, and is unaccountable. It is no wonder that literary employments — reading as well as writing — are seen as an affront to those with schedules to attend to, or to those who seek to maintain efficiency standards. Society will retaliate. One cannot claim to need to know about Benjy's curling flower spaces, or Ishmael's whale line, in order to do one's business or attend to one's obligations properly. However, it is more likely that one cannot make these claims credibly because literary critics have not articulated their validity.

Reading literature mirrors the kind of social rejection necessary to the creation of imaginative fiction. When readers engage in the forms of distraction demanded by the text, they participate in a ritual of inattentiveness set into the fiction by its creator, its author. The twentieth century has not always proved so hospitable to literary distraction. On the eve of the century, Sarah Orne Jewett envisioned the quest for literary space as one that involved travel to the more remote regions of geographical consciousness. In *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896), a woman travels to Maine in order to find “all that mixture of remoteness, and childish certainty of being the centre of civilization” (5) that makes reading and writing possible. Hunting seclusion, she goes to Dunnet Landing to escape the social world and find the privacy and certainty necessary to artistic creation. However, when she arrives she becomes enmeshed in the community through her landlady's herb business and thus must struggle to create space for inattention:

To have been patted kindly on the shoulder and called “darlin’,” to have been offered a surprise of early mushrooms for supper, to have had all the glory of making two dollars and twenty-seven cents in a single day, and then to renounce it all and withdraw from these pleasant successes, needed much resolution. Literary employments are so vexed with uncertainties at best, and it was not until the voice of conscience sounded louder in my ears than the sea on the nearest pebble beach that I said unkind words of withdrawal to Mrs. Todd. She only became more wistfully affectionate than ever in her expressions, and looked as disappointed as I expected when I frankly told her that I could no longer enjoy the pleasure of what we called “seein’ folks.” (8)

The act of committing oneself to literary employments is explicitly *unkind*: it shows a willed lack of consideration for others and represents a breaking with the social rewards that come from attentiveness. Reading past the predicament of the writer in Jewett’s passage, past the entangling seductions of the immediate world (being someone’s darlin’, sharing supper, making \$2.27), we find that literary employments are made possible by renunciation, withdrawal, and resolution. Furthermore, these acts of unkindness and resolve are issued in order to gain entry into a world of *certainty* (although a certainty precariously vexed by uncertainty), and so naturally, it would seem, the recipients of these acts would misconstrue them and suffer the kind of disappointment experienced by the abandoned Mrs. Todd.

Reading past *The Country of the Pointed Firs* brings the reader to a description of those forms of behavior produced by literary modes of thought. One cannot plead human nature here, which seems to be social. On the contrary, literary employments are located outside the natural inclinations of human beings and within the proclivities of conscious effort. Literary employments thus renounce natural connections, from the transcendent human identification with such natural forces as the sea to the sensual pleasures of being loved, cared for, and needed by someone else. To attend to the book, one must renounce the world at hand for the “uncivil” world of the distracted mind. The impulse places the imagination at the core of consciousness, as it was in childhood, before knowledge made its inroads and adult provisionality replaced the child’s sense of being securely centered. With creative energies at the core and not at the fringe, the imagination is temporarily restored to a position of conscious dominance while the book is read and contemplated. Freed from the reciprocal obligations of sensual, interpersonal attentions, the imagination returns to its primary function, which is to provide the self with its pleased sense of security and reality. When the “lover of Dunnet Landing returned to find the unchanged shores of the pointed firs,” she returns like a reader to a book, and discovers something constant about herself.

Still, the price of discovery is the act of unkindness that makes literary employment possible. In Jewett’s novel, the narrator renounces her home in New York for Dunnet Landing, and then must renounce Dunnet Landing for a one-room schoolhouse, where she sets up her writing desk. The gradually more severe renunciation signals the obstacles that the twentieth century would

place before literary employments, as “Dunnet Landing” would become increasingly more difficult to locate on the psychic landscape. The need to *pay attention* — to broadcasts, motorists, and communication devices — exacts a continuously rising price on imaginative impulses and foreshortens the amount of time when the imagination rules consciousness. While childhood shrinks, adolescence is lengthened, and this protracted period of powerless attentiveness results in a range of anxieties, social disorders, and learning disabilities. Chronic inattentiveness is tolerated in childhood only, although what it represents to the mind is necessary to all of us. Of course, reading is only one form, perhaps the most difficult and most encompassing form, of distraction. Television, magazines, sporting events, video games, the internet: these are all forms of distraction in which the imagination is only partially ascendant, where attention is divided but not obliterated, so as to allow the maintenance of social obligations. Nonetheless, the popularity of such forms of partial inattention indicates the limited satisfaction provided by continuously paying attention.

In a remarkable book devoted to the mysteries of attention, James Hans explains the “psychic economy that depends on inattention”:

If we say that we need inattention because we require states of being that take us away from the anxiety of living, we are conceding that the burdens of being a self-aware creature are too great for us to bear for any length of time. And if we see the ways that our desire for inattention has created a series of social forms that are designed to take our minds off of our anxieties, then we can see how the two coalesce to provide us with a life that inclines toward inattention rather than full awareness. (34)

The extraordinary burdens of self-awareness can be and are relieved in countless ways, some of which are physically debilitating. Tremendous resources are expended on forms of attention — education, preparation, development of skills — but when it comes to inattention, most people are on their own or at the mercy of entertainment industries, drug dealers, and liquor stores. The fact is that educational institutions fail to attend systematically to modes of inattention because, like Cather’s critics in the 1930s, they equate inattention with escapism, and escapism with irresponsibility. The cliff-dwelling women needed to apply geometrical patterns to their earthenware just as, in Hans’s words, we need inattention because we concede “that the burdens of being a self-aware creature are too great for us to bear for any length of time.” And more than that: we concede that if we are to go on toting water up the hill we are going to have to get past the drudgery of attending to the task. We move with distraction past our predicament and turn inattention into art — we *require* inattention as a mode of survival. Distraction is more than a form of anxiety release; it is a crucial component of the solution to a psychic dilemma as old as human recording. “Why are we here?” is always, in part, answered by, “So we do not have to be here.” The relation between the two heres is the province of literature. Distraction, even coarse forms such as mass entertainment and alcohol, is never mindless; on the contrary, it is an escape from frittering mindlessness, a mindful compensation for the dullness that enforced attentiveness produces, achieved through pleased inattention to its sources and causes.

The heedlessness and negligence of inattention, and the departure from social modes of courteous attention represented by literary endeavors, provide the grounds upon which we may begin to defend what it is we mean by the value of literary study. Formalist criticism has long argued the capacity of literature to defamiliarize the real, to make it strange, as a preparation for renewed insight and greater understanding of reality. Social criticism values works of the imagination as lenses into the complexities of race and gender, historical forces and class structures. The two modes of analysis — formal and social — have been pitted against each other through most of the twentieth century, although both share a devotion to imaginative structures of knowledge. Distraction floats past all of these categories of analysis, like the student whose gaze directs his face outside, through the window in the schoolroom, although he is not looking at anything and nothing has his attention. It is the teacher, not the student, who labels such inattentiveness discourtesy. Genuine inattention does not signify the absence of interest or even the presence of disinterest; rather, what we assign as inattention more likely signals an excessive intake, like sleeping scholars in midnight library carrels. To dismiss such actions as forms of negligence is to burn the book, as it were, as an evil influence or inappropriate stimulant. The literary tradition in all of its evocations and critical paradigms is, at base, the verbal manifestation of the human need for modes of distraction. Labeled “escapist” by those with authoritarian agendas, the need to pay attention where it yields the most pleasurable cognitive return is at the heart of the literary experience. Distraction is serious business, representing more than discourtesy. Our management experts, our social scientists of every stripe, would like the world to be a courteous and heedful place where rules govern human behavior — except for an occasional, structured retreat or brainstorming session. But the world is influenced more by its record of inattention than by its commitment to any particular intellectual regime. According to the OED, distraction signals a change in direction:

**distraction** *n.*

LME. [(O)Fr., or L *distractio(n)-*, *f.* as DISTRACT *v.*: see -ION.]

Diversion of the mind, attention, etc., from a particular object or course; the fact of having one's attention or concentration disturbed by something; amusement, relaxation. LME.

An instance or occasion of this; something that distracts or diverts the mind or attention; distracting sounds, events, etc. E17.

The fact or condition of being physically or mentally drawn in different directions by conflicting forces or emotions. L16.

The best of what we read — and here we come upon core issues of canon formation — specifically addresses our attention-paying capacities. The realm of the imagination is contested space because all social reality flows from it, and all social potentiality depends upon it. Unless one considers the world a paradise and desires no changes, all distraction, including literary representation, will be of signal importance. However, it is not mimesis that interests me but the structure of distraction built into the text. The strong women-centered

community in Jewett's novel does not, finally, gain the attention so much as the equation of that community with remoteness and renunciation, suggesting the ways in which the world of the writer has been defined as a distracted, absent, male world, closer to that of the sailor than that of his wife. Reading past representation, we come upon the cognitive links of imaginative attention and witness the recasting of the world that renunciation brings to the fore. Like a lost vessel, drifting is a necessary prelude to the redefinition of one's sense of direction. And there is no greater pleasure than the sense of floating above, transcending physical and intellectual confinement, and starting or becoming anew.

At one point in Willa Cather's novel, *My Ántonia*, the narrator, Jim Burden, agrees to sleep where Ántonia Shimerda is house-sitting because she has become fearful of Wick Cutter, the man who owns the house. She fears for her physical safety. During the third night that Burden is sleeping in the Cutters' house, the man returns, ostensibly to rape Ántonia. "A hand closed softly on my shoulder," Jim reports, "and at the same moment I felt something hairy and cologne-scented brushing my face." When Cutter discovers Jim has replaced Ántonia, he is enraged and begins choking and beating Jim. After the beating, Jim runs back home and goes to sleep.

Grandmother found me there in the morning. Her cry of fright awakened me. Truly, I was a battered object. As she helped me to my room, I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror. My lip was cut and stood out like a snout. My nose looked like a big blue plum, and one eye was swollen shut and hideously discolored. Grandmother said we must have the doctor at once, but I implored her, as I never begged for anything before, not to send for him. I could stand anything, I told her, so long as nobody saw me or knew what happened to me. (189)

As for Ántonia, Jim testifies that he "hated her almost as much as I hated Cutter. She had let me in for all this' disgustingness." Properly explicated, this scene is read as a classic reversal of roles. Hence, we witness the education of Jim Burden, as he learns about what he calls the disgustingness of the aftermath of a rape — the quality of degenerated self-awareness that follows sexual assault. Jim is thoroughly feminized by the experience, even to the point of worrying "what the old men down at the drug-store" would say about it all.

To what extent can a man take the place of a woman, have her experiences, know the world as she knows it? These are not uncomplicated questions. *My Ántonia* is written from the perspective of Jim Burden, the male narrator and substitute rape victim. And although Jim takes Willa Cather's place in this novel, critics have differed in their reactions to this literary device (see for instance Donovan; Fetterly; and Lambert). Can a woman write through the perspective of a male narrative voice, and if she does, is her male voice really a female voice masquerading as male? The issue is foregrounded in a brief introduction that forms part of the novel, where yet another narrator (frequently understood as Cather herself) claims to have received the manuscript of "My Ántonia" from Jim Burden. But Jim Burden is a fictional creation of Willa

Cather, a product of her imagination. Readers encountering the novel for the first time often wonder, is this really something that was given to Cather — that is, did she not write this herself? The question is a good one. The novel begs its readers to read past gender, past the facts of “herself,” and to pose the question: If I had that body, and that set of experiences, what would the world look like and feel like to me?

Jim’s response to his experience is heavily coded as female, as if he had been made into a woman by the assault on his physical self. The formal strategy Cather employs in this novel, where the male narrative voice gives her the text, and the text is informed by his voice, and the voice in turn becomes Cather’s text, must be read past in order to be comprehended fully. If a man could take a woman’s place, in the logic of the Burden/Cutter scene, if he could experience the world as she experiences it, he would act and react as she does. Furthermore, the “if” is easily removed from the previous statement when the man (or the woman) is willing to suspend his sense of himself and enter into the experience of another, imaginatively. Our experiences author us, in other words, including those experiences we have when we are inattentive to our daily lives. These speculations are enforced by Cather’s own effort in the novel to read past her female self and imagine, in the narrative, the male voice. The assault on Jim is a restoration of the original reversal, where Cather becomes the male narrator, and then the male narrator becomes the female victim.

The costs incurred in not attending to who we are may be psychically severe. As Stanley Aronowitz reminds us, “loyalty to the nation-state, conventionally tied to the meaning of citizenship itself, is shifted to subculture or gender, often taken as subculture” (62). Literary study in today’s classroom does, and always has done, the work of political culture, particularly by the process of reading for recognition. Readers wish to see themselves — their sexuality, their race, their people — reflected in what they read; and, if possible, they prefer to see themselves as they would like to be: articulate, consequential, recognized. If the course of study is American literature and I am an American, I (or someone like me) ought to be recognizable on the syllabus. What Cather’s text does is to question this method of reading. Who recognizes Jim Burden, the male or the female reader? The males will say, that’s not me because the female author cannot know my experiences, even if she calls her narrator “Jim.” The female reader will say, that’s not me because this particular female author must mask herself as “Jim” and I am not so masked. But once the literary mode of cognition abandons the ability to attend to matters outside its physical boundaries, it has little left that exceeds confession.

As we come to accept, with increasingly less reflection, the social equation of reading and recognition, we lose sight of the fundamental value of the literary experience, which has only partially and not always to do with recognition of one’s own nonliterary existence. I do not mean that literature must decenter us, or make the familiar strange, or expand our horizons, or make us more sensitive to others — well, I mean all of these formalist things, of course, but also something more. My refrain: Literary study is the study of *how one reads past*. It is not the study of maleness, or the study of the female voice, or the study of any particularly decentered representation or estranged reception of reality but

the study of how one reads *past* every one of these phenomena to the structures of cognition that produce and sustain them. In *My Ántonia*, Willa Cather escaped the confines of gender as an unproblematic determinant of artistic production — that is, she enveloped the voice of the male and spoke it back. Cather's escape, no matter how we assess it, brings the pleasurable prospect of our own escape from confinement.

The most difficult thing for the human mind to envision is another mode of thought, a mode of consciousness that will render its own thought processes obsolete. And yet, historically, we know that such paradigm shifts have occurred with epochal regularity. Today's common sense evolves into the next era's idiocy, when what we accept as articulate expression is reinterpreted as bobbing, moaning, and slobbering. "Books that exceed our customary uses of language can teach us not just new facts — something we did not already know — but new forms of life: *something we did not necessarily know we wanted or needed to know*" (Carafiol 168). Peter Carafiol claims that such books "do not change the world. They are changes *in* the world that prompt changes in the reader." *My Ántonia* is something of an intrusion, a work of fiction whose fictionality includes not only the circumstances of its emergence but the assaults it made upon the mind of its author. Reading past its narrative incidents and details brings us to a realm where experience and essence cross. The relation between Jim Burden and Willa Cather lies between the curling flower spaces of our imaginative capacities, within the ellipses of consciousness, in the spaces left out of the current configuration of human perception and articulation.

Dilsey says of the Compson landholdings, "We aint got the room we use to have." One must travel to far-off places, further than Dunnet Landing, for a psychic landscape that has room for Benjamin Compson. As a result, Dilsey says, Benjamin "cant stay out in the yard, crying where all the neighbors can see him" (60). The closing in of private space (or the expansion of the public, mediated community) and the increasingly insistent demands to pay attention, make Benjamin's voice intrusive on others who don't want to attend to its wail. The meaning of human speech changes with every shift in context, and what is a sympathetic plea in one set of circumstances becomes a pathetic annoyance in another. Rodney King asks, "Why can't we just get along?" after his beating by Los Angeles police, and the utterance eventually becomes a trope for cluelessness on the comedy club and morning radio circuit. What Benjamin Compson says, what he has to say, is of no value to the neighbors, even if they were to be told about all time and injustice and sorrow and all voiceless misery under the sun. The neighbors just don't want to know about it, don't want their *inattention* filled that way because, as we know, Benjy is pretty disgusting and the change in the world represented by his voice is not pleasant.

Literary texts, despite the private nature of reading them, are public documents, and they inspire and inform public discourse. The detail of the Compson neighbors not appreciating Benjamin's wail signals an ethical issue to the reader: should Benjamin be hidden away? The guidebooks make it clear that at the very least, he must be *explained away*, so that the reader's attention is not piqued to the point of exhaustion by the narrative's formulaic uncertainty. The neighbors are well within their rights to demand a quiet neighborhood; cer-



tainly, readers of the text will demand the same from their own neighbors. The ethical issue has nothing to do with the neighbors, finally, but with Benjamin and his narrative. What is to be done with the man who is a completely asocial, noncomprehending, inarticulate, compulsively needy sibling, whose words require that we read another book to make sense of them? Caddy hugs him but leaves him; Quentin gets him drunk; Dilsey feeds him; Jason has him castrated and committed. Each act, alone, and in certain combinations, represents a social option, and each act mirrors a critical intervention. However, in order truly to make room for Benjamin Compson, we need to resist every effort to rationalize his discourse. We must renounce every hug, drink, and incision available to us as readers; Benjamin cannot be absorbed, obliterated, or edited to suit the structure of thought we bring to bear on his textual existence.

Literary encounters provoke intellectual restructuring. Martha Nussbaum has found literary texts useful on law school reading lists because “[l]iterature focuses on the possible, inviting its readers to wonder about themselves” (5). Nussbaum is not thinking about subject matter so much as the more formal aspects of literary texts. “In their very mode of address to their imagined reader, they convey the sense that there are links of possibility, at least on a very general level, between the characters and the reader.” As a result of these affinities, the reader’s speculative imagination is piqued to envision alternative modes of being: what would it be like to be Benjamin Compson, and in what ways are we like him already? The imagination of alternatives is vital to the practice of law and to the health of a democracy in general, which is why Nussbaum brings literary texts to the preprofessional legal curriculum. “The reader’s emotions and imagination are very active as a result,” Nussbaum concludes, “and it is the nature of this activity, and its relevance for public thinking” that merit critical scrutiny. The capacity of literary study to lead the mind toward breaking through barriers of thinking, to make more space where it seems “we aint got the room,” is the pleasure of the well-flung harpoon, or the perfectly wrought earthenware jug.

Faulkner’s novel is difficult to read and requires sustained attention; or, more accurately, it requires periodic inattention. The reader must interrupt reading the novel and consider what sort of sense to make of it. There comes a point where “we aint got the room” and we, as thinking subjects, must divert our attention from the spasmodic narrative. *The Sound and the Fury* seems aware of the demands it makes on human attention because it structures distraction into its narrative. Consider the following passage, in which Quentin Compson is fighting (unsuccessfully) with his sister’s lover:

I hit him my open hand beat the impulse to shut it to his face his hand moved as fast as mine the cigarette went over the rail I swung with the other hand he caught it too before the cigarette reached the water he held both my wrists in the same hand his other hand flicked to his armpit under his coat behind him the sun slanted and a bird singing somewhere beyond the sun we looked at one another while the bird singing he turned my hands loose (160)

The bird evoked at the end of the passage signals a lack of room in Quentin's mind, and a need to think past his predicament. His sister Caddy is pregnant by this man, Dalton Ames, and Quentin wants to run him out of town because of it. However, Ames proves to be a considerate lover, asking about Caddy, and for all we know he has no interest in deserting her. Furthermore, Quentin is not up to the task of physically forcing the man to do anything, as seen in the passage above. At the point when Quentin is "caught" (with both wrists held in one of Ames's hands) his mind departs from the immediate situation and he is distracted by "a bird singing somewhere beyond the sun." Hence, Quentin is not paying attention to his immediate business with Dalton Ames. With the bird in mind, Quentin has the potential to read past his predicament, realizing what he must do to survive, if not prevail, in this circumstance. And so "we looked at one another while the bird singing he turned my hands loose." Quentin doesn't quite make it, by the way — he soon assaults Ames again and is subdued, again gently, by the kind lover, who leaves quietly to save Quentin embarrassment. This second time, however, the bird signals release from Quentin's mental impasse.

I leaned on the rail looking at the water I heard him untie the horse and ride off and after a while I couldn't hear anything but the water and then the bird again I left the bridge and sat down with my back against the tree and shut my eyes a patch of sun came through and fell across my eyes and I moved a little further around the tree I heard the bird again and the water and then everything sort of rolled away and I didnt feel anything at all I felt almost good . . . after a while I knew that he hadnt hit me that he had lied about that for her sake too and that I had just passed out like a girl but even that didnt matter anymore (162; ellipsis added)

I would equate Quentin's attention to the bird with the reader's attention to literature and with the potential for public thinking held by literary studies. In a bind, such as finding out that the villain is no blackguard, or trying to fight and finding the opponent is not only more powerful than you but also does not consider you an enemy and has no interest in fighting, the mind has some options. It can shut down in despair. It can go on fighting, insisting that the enemy become an enemy (at one point Ames offers Quentin a pistol), making the fight itself the point of contention, rather than the issue which gave rise to the confrontation. Or the mind can depart, read past its predicament to something else, another level of consciousness, through the fictional to a structure of consciousness capable of transcendence. In short, it may decide not to pay attention for a while — to be distracted, that is, by its desire for pleasure even in the midst of turmoil, secure in the knowledge that distraction ("diversion of the mind, attention, etc., from a particular object or course") may in fact be the solution.

The value of literary study is precisely in the function of reading past the necessary and mechanical depictions of the real and providing room for readers to do the same. The solution to an intellectual problem is seldom located in the kind of thinking that produced the problem in the first place. Academic liter-

ature programs maintain their place in higher education because, frankly, of their irrelevance to the research and teaching objectives of preprofessional curricula. Like Quentin's bird, literary studies are there for the attention of those who realize, finally, that the human mind is nurtured very much by what it does not need to know. Reading past *The Sound and the Fury*, we find that when faced with an incontrovertible fact, a barrier, an unresolvable problem, the answer is to look elsewhere, past the immediate toward the irrelevant — perhaps to engage another sense, another source of pleasure. Literature distracts; it directs our attention *elsewhere*, as a release from the confinements of yesterday's insight, the hands of Dalton Ames, the body of Antonia Shimerda. From such constraints we crave the pleasures of distraction, to be "physically or mentally drawn in different directions by conflicting forces or emotions," to enter the realm between the curling flower spaces of our expectations.

Then again, there is some danger in this process. Quentin Compson, who hears the song of the invisible bird, goes to Harvard, where he ultimately commits suicide. Is literary studies a parlor game, or do we face danger when we ask minds to read past their predicament? In *Sanctuary*, Faulkner juxtaposes the killer's gun and reader's book in the novel's opening scene, where a man with a gun and a man with a book engage in a two-hour standoff.

That was about four o'clock on an afternoon in May. They squatted so, facing one another across the spring, for two hours. Now and then the bird sang back in the swamp, as though it were worked by a clock; twice more invisible automobiles passed along the highroad and died away. Again the bird sang. (5)

It is impossible to accept the literal detail of the encounter, where the two men face each other from four until six p.m. The reader is quite likely to ignore it. However, if we *read past* the duration, we have two unlikely details juxtaposed. First, there is the two-hour encounter. But the second and even less credible represented fact is that the one man's gun is checked, or held in abeyance, by the other man's book. The incomprehensible nature of the encounter amounts to an overloaded set of stimuli — there isn't room in the mind to make sense of it — and rather than attend to the encounter, we attend to the sound of the bird, and note its clockishness. The province of literature is in the bird's song, and when we read, in attentive inattention, it is always a face-off, *while the bird singing*, within someone else's powers of cognition. The particulars of representation, whether of Dunnet Landing or Yoknapatawpha County, are secondary and often irrelevant to the processes of creation and escape embedded in the modes of attention demanded by the text. In any case, it is always the book *versus* the gun, the lure of distraction in a standoff against those stimuli that demand our attention.

The result of attending to the song of this bird may lead to deaths of all kinds — the death of certain ways of thinking, the death of solidly held convictions, the death of impassable thoughts — not all of which are, by progressive standards, bad things. Like a bird sent into a mineshaft, we look to it as a harbinger of survival. However, there are no guarantees. Literary studies has

no programmatic mission outside of making room in the mind. Hence, literary politics are always chaotic, unsystematic, and volatile, while literary study — the experience of making room in the mind — brings pleasure to those who can read its language. It feels good to clear space, to engage those senses dulled by attentiveness, to engage in studied distraction. However, once room is made, what moves in is not predictable. Reading literary texts makes the mind vulnerable to potential assault as well as to potential liberation. Unkind words may and often do result from literary employments. Once we have imagined ourselves as someone else, as Jim Burden perhaps, or once we have let someone or something else control our cognitive processes, we may find our moorings revealed as whale lines, linked to monstrosities. A simple gesture, innocent as the bird's song, is thus revealed in the reading of it as participating in something demonic, in the destruction of worlds. Quentin, at Harvard, managed to read past his sense of himself as brother, to lover, and then to victim; he then, as Quentin, ceased to exist. "So we die before our own eyes," Jewett's narrator says, as she leaves Dunnet Landing; "so we see some chapters of our lives come to their natural end" (100). Reading literature is always a judgment on the real. To choose the novel over the newspaper, over the book of nonfiction, or over the television (which, even if fantasy, is punctuated regularly with commercial calls to attention), is to say No to the actual and Yes (as it were) to the bird's song, beyond the sun. So we choose to die before our own eyes. But even if nature will not suffice, our most durable myths tell us that from death comes new life.

The habit of reading past can be taught, but only if literary pedagogy remains distinct from most other forms of teaching, forms that rely upon the importation of knowledge, and upon making clear what is to be known. Literary study is often sabotaged by instructional methods that call upon students to read texts as sociological or psychological cases, or as formalist or linguistic puzzles. These methods barely read, let alone read past, their texts. As professors of literature, we would serve our interests better if we claimed to teach methods of distraction. The feeling of Friday afternoon to the nine-to-five worker, the anticipation of the bell to the public school child, the embrace of the infant after the absence of the parent, the lover's eyes across crowded public spaces: these are the pleasures of welcomed distraction, promising escape from here and access to another level of existence, where muted senses are brought back to life. The purpose of literary study is to make room in the mind *now* for such pleasures of renewal, so that it can read past what it knows, or is expected to know, and migrate to other cognitive structures of knowledge.

The title character of Bharati Mukherjee's 1989 novel, *Jasmine*, narrates a tale of immigration to the United States from India. Jasmine arrives in Florida and is raped by a degenerate figure called Half-Face, whom she kills. She then flees to New York, becomes an au pair (and falls in love with Taylor, the father in the family for whom she works), and finally moves again to Iowa, where she lives with a paraplegic man named Bud. The novel culminates, on its last page, in a scene where Taylor reappears with his daughter to take Jasmine to California. This is the novel's final paragraph:

Then there is nothing I can do. Time will tell if I am a tornado, rubble-maker, arising from nowhere and disappearing into a cloud. I am out the door and in the potholed and rutted driveway, scrambling ahead of Taylor, greedy with wants and reckless from hope.

By its placement in the text, it would seem that the conclusion to the novel is Jasmine's decision to move again, to leave Bud for Taylor. The novel, however, is not written in a linear fashion. Instead, its narrative proceeds kaleidoscopically, with scenes from India, Florida, New York, and Iowa interspersed, making a text that is "pitted, pocked, and broken up," according to its epigraph. Furthermore, at the end of the first chapter, the narrator explains, "I am twenty-four now, and I live in Baden County, Iowa" (3), as if the novel were about to unfold from this particular perspective. However, if Jasmine is twenty-four and in Iowa "now," at the novel's writing, then where exactly is the "now" of the text's conclusion? The last paragraph casts her "out the door" and "scrambling ahead of Taylor," off to a place that will not be Baden, Iowa. Hence, what *follows* Iowa is the only perspective from which the entire novel, including the conclusion, can be written. Otherwise, the "now" of the first chapter must be ignored.

Reading past India, immigration, sexual politics, and American identities, Mukherjee's novel cogitates on what it ever means to say, "I am this old now and I live here." The text thus echoes Cather's Southwest Native American women, whose now was filled with geometrical expressions of the aesthetics of their duties as pot bearers. Jasmine's sense of now overflows with greedy wants and reckless hopes. Like Plato's concept of *becoming*, the now of Mukherjee's novel is eternally and defiantly emergent, and "there is nothing [anyone] can do" about it. To Mukherjee, one answer to the question, "why are we here now" (living here; toting here; whaling here; listening to the bird's song here) is always, "so we do not have to be here now." The pleasure of escape is eternally on the tip of human consciousness, and *always* the subject matter of literary expression, for those who can read its language.

Literary modes of thought expand commonsense notions of the now, and extend the content of now as cognitive space. The now of reading is always elsewhere, else-when, distracted. If, in *Jasmine*, time will tell what the final paragraph means, then the paragraph defies mimetic significance, as there is no time past the ending of any novel. The narrator says, "I am twenty-four now, and I live in Baden, Iowa," and the novel ends with the narrator no longer living there. Hence, the entire novel consists of a geometrically, or spatially extended now, as if a moment of intense decision can encompass a lifetime. Jasmine's decision to abandon Bud (made even more pivotal by the fact she is pregnant) is charted and prefigured by twenty-four years of abandonment, reversal, and trauma. Reading past any moral or ethical reading of Jasmine's decision to leave the father of her unborn child (as if a fictional character could exercise judgment worthy of anyone's contemplation), *Jasmine* enriches our sense of what we mean by now whenever we consider its meaning. Far from being emptied, far from a blip between one's sense of the future and one's past, between desire and memory, Mukherjee's now is spatially resonant, "greedy

with wants and reckless from hope." A major decision is thus explained neither ethically nor morally (as in, "one does not desert one's lover") but geometrically, by placing the cognitive process on a chart of personal experiences — experiences which are always possessed as the defining characteristics of one's sense of now.

Literary critics use the present tense when they discuss texts, because literary enactment always exists in the present, in the now. Benjamin Compson moans and slobbers eternally, and holds the jimson weed for comfort. In the now, with Jasmine, are Benjamin Compson, Jim Burden and Antonia Shimerda, the whale line, Dunnet Landing, Quentin's bird, Popeye's gun, and the curling flower spaces. In a prolonged and extensive now is where literary texts place the minds of *those who can read their language*, not in the name of attending to the present, but with the purpose of exploring underneath, beyond, and past it. And what else is pleasure, but a heightened sense of one's existence, in the now? Drugs and alcohol, for centuries, have aided human beings in their quest to expand experience — and specific narcotics have influenced more than one literary movement in history. Sexual pleasures awaken bodily sensations, held in check by a cerebral civilization whose purposes are complicated by physicality. Such distractions cannot be incorporated by demands for attention — don't drink and drive, and don't read and drive — but neither can the pleasures they represent be expunged from human impulses. Literary study cannot abandon the pleasures of inattention without abdicating its essence as a tradition — not as a canon but as a mode of thought. For once we read past historical fiction, science fiction, comedy, tragedy, romanticism, and the rest, the single, universal object of literary study is *the present* in all its limitlessness and expansion. Anything less trivializes our lives as literary scholars and trivializes the purpose of literary study. Above all else, we read literature to extend the present, to fill the now as fully as possible, paying no attention to the tendency of human institutions to trivialize the now by insisting that memory or management define it essentially. In the literary now, between the curling flower spaces, time will always tell what it is we get when we make room for the greedy wants and reckless desires of literary employments. This is what feels right, feels good.

First comes Benjamin Compson, in other words, full of sound and fury, and then comes puzzled attention, as when Caddy comes running with her book-satchel and listens to what Benjy has to say. The strength of such literary encounters has always resided, ultimately, in the mode of thought resurrected on the page.

"Did you come to meet Caddy." she said, rubbing my hands. "What is it. What are you trying to tell Caddy." Caddy smelled like trees and like when she says we were asleep.

*What are you moaning about, Luster said. You can watch them again when we get back to the branch. Here. Here's you a jimson weed. He gave me the flower. We went through the fence, into the lot. (6)*

What do we want to say, what do we moan about, when we become so distracted we read past the page? Literary recognition is not a matter of mirrored

reflection but an abrupt encounter with something we thought we had lost, some way of thinking possessed by someone else, in another place, at some other time. In the text something survives, coarse and poisonous, like the jimson weed, or playfully welcomed, like the jouncing booksatchel, dogging us through the fence and into the realm of public thinking. When we accustom our minds to the patterns on the earthenware pots, we find ourselves reading past the function of the jars, escaping into the realm of what tugs at the lines, and, *while the bird singing*, finding what provides when we become heedless, negligent, and inattentive.

## Notes

1. Among the examples: Hahn and Kinney; Ross and Polk; Matthews; Polk; Bloom; Kinney; Bleikasten; Meriwether; and Cowan.
2. This has become a problem in the workplace. See, for example, Breuer. It is also an issue with the growing move to allow employees to work at home. See Roha.

## Works Cited

- Altieri, Charles. *Canons and Consequences: Reflections on the Ethical Force of Imaginative Ideals*. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1990.
- Aronowitz, Stanley. *Roll Over Beethoven: The Return of Cultural Strife*. Hanover, NH: UP of New England, 1993.
- Bérubé, Michael. *Public Access: Literary Theory and American Cultural Politics*. New York: Verso, 1994.
- Birkirts, Sven. *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age*. New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1994.
- Bleikasten, André. *The Most Splendid Failure: Faulkner's "The Sound and the Fury."* Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1976.
- Bloom, Harold, ed. *William Faulkner's "The Sound and the Fury."* New York: Chelsea House, 1988.
- Breuer, Nancy. "Minimize Distractions for Maximum Output." *Personnel Journal* 74.5 (1995): 70-4.
- Carafiol, Peter. *The American Ideal: Literary History as a Worldly Activity*. New York: Oxford UP, 1991.
- Cather, Willa. "Escapism: A Letter to *The Commonweal*." 1936. *Willa Cather on Writing: Critical Studies on Writing as Art*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1988.
- . *My Antonia*. 1918. New York: Penguin, 1994.
- Chance, M. R. A., and Larsen, R. R. "Introduction." *The Social Structure of Attention*. Ed. Chance and Larsen. New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1976. 1-10.
- Cherkes-Julkowski, Miriam, Susan Sharp, and Jonathan Stolzenberg. *Rethinking Attention Deficit Disorders*. Cambridge, MA: Brookline Books, 1997.

- Cowan, Michael H., ed. *Twentieth-Century Interpretations of "The Sound and the Fury": A Collection of Critical Essays*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1968.
- Donovan, Josephine. "The Pattern of Birds and Beasts: Willa Cather and Women's Art." *Writing the Woman Artist: Poetics, Politics, and Portraiture*. Ed. Suzanne W. Jones. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1991. 81-95.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "The Transcendentalist." 1843. *The Portable Emerson*. Ed. Carl Bode. New York: Penguin, 1981. 92-110.
- Faulkner, William. *Sanctuary*. 1931. New York: Vintage, 1993.
- . *The Sound and the Fury*. 1929. New York: Vintage, 1990.
- Fetterly, Judith. "My Antonia: Jim Burden and the Dilemma of the Lesbian Writer." *Gender Studies: New Directions in Feminist Criticism*. Ed. Judith Spector. Bowling Green: Bowling Green SU Popular P, 1986. 43-59.
- Guillory, John. *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation*. Chicago: U Chicago P, 1993.
- Hahn, Stephen, and Arthur F. Kinney, eds. *Approaches to Teaching Faulkner's "The Sound and the Fury"*. New York: MLA, 1996.
- Hans, James S. *The Mysteries of Attention*. Albany: SU of New York P, 1993.
- Jewett, Sarah Orne. *The Country of the Pointed Firs and Other Stories*. 1896. New York: Penguin, 1995.
- Kinney, Arthur F., ed. *Critical Essays on William Faulkner: The Compson Family*. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1982.
- Lambert, Deborah. "The Defeat of a Hero: Autonomy and Sexuality in My Antonia." *American Literature* 53.4 (1982): 676-90.
- Matthews, John T. *"The Sound and the Fury": Faulkner and the Lost Cause*. Boston: Twayne, 1991.
- Melville, Herman. *Moby-Dick or, The Whale*. 1851. New York: Penguin, 1992.
- Meriwether, James B., ed. *The Merrill Studies in "The Sound and the Fury"*. Columbus: Merrill, 1970.
- Mukherjee, Bharati. *Jasmine*. New York: Ballantine, 1989.
- Nussbaum, Martha C. *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life*. Boston: Beacon P, 1995.
- OED. *New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on CD-Rom*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996.
- Parker, David. *Ethics, Theory and the Novel*. New York: Cambridge UP, 1994.
- Polk, Noel, ed. *New Essays on "The Sound and the Fury"*. New York: Cambridge UP, 1993.
- Roha, Ronaleen. "Home Alone." *Kiplinger's Personal Finance Magazine* 51.5 (1997): 85-90.
- Ross, Stephen M., and Noel Polk. *Reading Faulkner: "The Sound and the Fury"*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1996.
- Twain, Mark. *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. 1885. Berkeley: U of California P, 1985.
- Volpe, Edmond. *A Reader's Guide to William Faulkner*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1964.